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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

October 26, 2007

The Honorable R. David Paulison
Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency
Department of Homeland Security
500 C Street, SW
Washington, DC 20472

Dear Administrator Paulison:

It has come to my attention that a member of your staff, Vice Admiral Harvey E. Johnson, this week held a press conference on the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) response to the wildfires engulfing southern California. I am disappointed to learn that Adm. Johnson misled the press and the public by taking questions from his own staff pretending to be reporters and that the agency did not disclose this misrepresentation.

The California wildfires have displaced thousands of families and destroyed thousands of homes, killing 16 in its wake while leaving American families with the daunting task of rebuilding their lives. FEMA's response to the wildfires has so far been commendable, but this is not the time to hold fake press conferences to artificially improve the image of the embattled agency.

An open dialogue with the press is essential to keeping the public informed, holding our leaders accountable and providing a forum for debate. But now it appears that your deputy and his staff disserved this public interest by misrepresenting themselves and pre-selecting questions for this "press conference."

I respectfully ask that within 30 days you provide the U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery a written explanation of how this error in judgment came to be. Specifically:

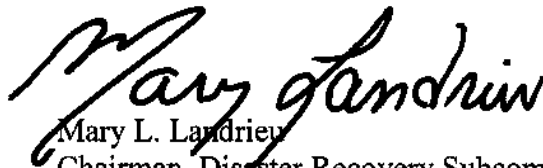
- What was the extent of the decision-making process that resulted in these employees falsely portraying themselves as members of the press?
- Did you have prior knowledge that this "press conference" would be organized in this fashion? If so, why did you approve it?

- What actions have or will be taken to hold Vice Adm. Johnson and other involved members of your staff accountable for their decisions?
- What directives have or will be issued to prevent such an error in judgment from being repeated?

The response to the California wildfires by all levels of government has been a dramatic improvement over FEMA's performance in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. You and Homeland Security Department Secretary Michael Chertoff came to the front line of the disaster quickly, and the President seems to have invested himself in addressing it from the start. As you know, this was not the initial show of force we saw along the Gulf Coast. I hope that FEMA image-building is not a substitute for the necessary reforms to ensure that the agency's response to this and future disasters is comprehensive, swift and effective.

With warmest regards, I remain

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Mary Landrieu". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Mary" and last name "Landrieu" clearly distinguishable.

Mary L. Landrieu
Chairman, Disaster Recovery Subcommittee
U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs